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ABSTRACT

The associate of arts (AA) major was implemented at Valencia Community College (VCC) in Florida as one of the goals set by an ACE-Kellogg roundtable for 1997. This degree was proposed with the intent of assisting students in making better decisions about choosing careers, majors, and courses. The AA major is equivalent to the current AA degree offered throughout Florida; the difference is that students choosing the AA major will have to decide on a baccalaureate major, which in turn guides the elective courses to be taken. The AA major will continue to provide the basic college-transfer requirements, with the electives being driven by the student's chosen major. These majors can be changed at the four-year university, or a student can choose a non-major, general studies AA. While some students who have a clear career direction can use the software program CyberAdviser to see several scenarios for classes they need to transfer into a degree program at a four-year university, some students will need more extensive advising and assistance. The advising program will need to be enhanced to include training for advisers and the establishment of workshops for students who wish to explore career options. (CB)

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Are AA Majors Right for the Community College?

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Problems in the Community College
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Spring, 1997

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INTRODUCTION:

At Valencia Community College, there has been interest in developing majors associated with the Associate in Arts degree. These A.A. majors would correspond to popular state university degree programs. These degrees would also be equivalent to the current Associate in Arts degrees that many community college students earn. Students will be able to select an A.A. major in the Fall of 1997. In this paper, I shall discuss the reasons for encouraging students in community colleges to follow an A.A. major track, the effects on advising, and the transferability of Valencia graduates.

REASONS FOR THE A.A. MAJOR:

In 1996, the first of several ACE-Kellogg roundtables began with the goals of making Valencia Community College more learning- centered, more ready for the 21st century, and more effective in serving its students and service district. One of the results of the roundtables was the Associate in Art major. This degree was proposed with the intent of assisting students in making better decisions about choosing careers, majors, and courses. The need for improvement in the advising process is the main reason for the creation of A.A. majors.

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The degrees will be equivalent to the current A.A degree offered throughout the state. The difference will be that the students choosing the A.A. major will have to decide on a

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baccalaureate major which in turn guides the elective courses to be taken to receive the A.A. with a major. In most cases, the student need not decide which program to major in until the last semester or two and the decision is not permanent. There will always be a non-major general studies A.A. available (Hooks and Williamson).

Also, students will have met the requirements of the A.A. for transferability purposes, regardless of the major chosen. A student with an A.A. in Finance can still opt to get a B.A. in History. The A.A. for majors will have the same weight in the state system as the traditional non-major A.A.

A primary concern of those opposed to the A.A. majors is that the college and its personnel may be pressuring students into choosing majors and forcing them down paths to failure and unfulfillment. These negative results may arise if students believe that an A.A. major holds the same career (job) potential as an A.S. major does. This concern is founded in the belief that the community college exists to give the student a broad educational foundation through its Associate in Arts degree and not become a "farm system" for certain programs, but for the university system in general. Because the A.A. majors will still carry the minimum course work for transferability, it matters very little what a students picks as a major at the community college level. The student will still be able to finish any bachelor's degree within three years beyond the community college, if necessary.

If one of the main goals for implementing the A.A. majors program is to provide students with better options in choosing careers and majors, then structures must be developed and refined to deal with this concern. According to Laurel Williamson, Assistant Vice President for Instruction,

"advisors will be trained as specialists" to assist students in choosing courses and setting schedules for completion of programs. The local university will also have to be kept up to date on developments in curriculum to support the A.A. majors that may affect access of transfers. Since the community college will now have what appears to be several choices, advising strategies will have to be enhanced.

EFFECTS ON ADVISING:

For many who are currently involved in advising students, informally and formally, the A.A. majors program is only legalizing what has been happening. Counselors, educational advisors, and faculty advisors possess documents that clearly state which courses should be taken at the community college to transfer smoothly into university upper division major programs. These transfer sheets allow advisors and students the opportunity to make sure that unwelcome surprises are kept to a minimum.

Since the Fall of 1995, many faculty and counselors have access to something known as CyberAdviser. CyberAdviser is computer program created through Title III funds by Stan Liebermann for Valencia Community College. The program takes information found on student transcripts and combines it with the academic and career interest of the students to map out the course sequencing for a student to graduate from Valencia. The program has been piloted with over 200 students and is able to show students as many scenarios as wished. Once a student decides what courses he or wishes to take during the subsequent semester, CyberAdviser (if connected to the mainframe) will register that student immediately. The program is user-friendly enough that a student with minimal computer experience can use it.

CyberAdviser and the counselors will not be enough for many students. Therefore, faculty will be and have been recruited to act as mentors, faculty advisors, and contact persons for various degree programs. The students, counselors, educational advisors, and faculty will have to have better and more accurate communication to handle the increased need for student advising. The students will be required to seek out assistance with greater persistence and more frequently. Faculty will be asked to get trained in academic advising techniques, which many are already doing "off the cuff." Communication between the community college and transfer universities will have to increase in order to better serve to students and adjust A.A. major programs to reflect changing university policies.

CONCLUSION:

The implementation of Associate in Arts majors will prove to be a great asset to all involved in student advisement and curriculum development. As students make decisions on majors, course scheduling can be adjusted to meet student demands for certain classes. Also, orientation sessions and workshops for particular majors can be co-sponsored by the community college and transfer universities to better prepare students for their upper division work.

A.A. majors will help focus the advisement of students. If students have a reasonable idea of what they want to do, educational and career planning becomes almost manageable. The advising component will be critical for the success of A.A. majors. CyberAdviser needs to be kept current with the trends and policies throughout the state university system and course availability at the community college. The advisors must be continually kept aware of the availability of majors and transferability issues. The students must be made aware that the A.A.

with a major does not guarantee admission into certain upper division programs and does not enough core classes to allow for direct entrance into most technically oriented fields. In the community college, only the A.S. is terminal and contains marketable skills. Communication and shared responsibility for advisement is the key to the success of the A.A. with majors initiative.

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